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SUBJECT: ATTACK ON NEWSPAPER OFFICES KILLS THREE AS DMK SUCCESSION
TURNS VIOLENT

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Three people were killed in an attack on a newspaper after it published a survey suggesting that the younger son of Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister has a huge lead over the older son in popular support to succeed the patriarch of the ruling DMK party. The violence, an infringement of press freedom, is also rooted in the volatile mix of money, power, and media ownership in the DMK succession struggle. Some observers point out that the anger of the older son's followers was actually directed at the owners of the newspaper - the family of Union IT and Telecommunications Minister Dayanidhi Maran - for suggesting that their family member is more popular than the Chief Minister's older son. END SUMMARY

12. (SBU) On May 9, a group of supporters of M.K. Azhagiri, the older son of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi, went to the Madurai offices of the newspaper "Dinakaran" to protest a survey published by the newspaper that showed Azhagiri far behind the Chief Minister's younger son, M.K. Stalin, in the struggle to succeed the aging Chief Minister as leader of the DMK party. According to media reports, the Azhagiri supporters (including the mayor of Madurai) started by burning copies of the paper at the gate, but then a few of them entered the newspaper building and went on the rampage, allegedly hurling "petrol bombs." Two employees of the newspaper and a security guard perished in the fire. The newspaper's staff said that police were present but did nothing to prevent the mob from entering the compound. (NOTE: Azhagiri has a history of political violence and is facing prosecution for his role in a 2003 murder. Given that history, and the autonomy with which he has run southern Tamil Nadu since the DMK came to power, allegations that the police stood by are likely true. END NOTE.)

13. (SBU) Azhagiri's poor showing in Dinakaran's May 9 survey titled, "Who should be the political successor to Karunanidhi?" set off the violence. Three of the contenders listed in the statewide survey were the Chief Minister's children: sons M.K. Azhagiri and M.K. Stalin, and his daughter Kanimozhi. The newspaper poll said Stalin had the support of 70% of DMK party members, while Azhagiri and Kanimozhi got only 2% each. Journalist contacts said that the survey's overall showing of 2% for Azhagiri, with only 6% in Madurai District, is dubious on its face as it flies in the face of Azhagiri's established popularity in Madurai and adjoining areas.

14. (SBU) The newspaper "Dinakaran" is owned by the Maran family, who are close relations of the Chief Minister and his family. Kalanidhi Maran runs the family's immensely successful media ventures, which include south India's most influential television network, Sun TV. Kalanidhi told post on April 27 that Stalin would undoubtedly succeed Karunanidhi, clearly indicating that the Maran media empire would support Stalin in the inevitable struggle for succession after Karunanidhi leaves the scene. The poll not only has Stalin ahead of Azhagiri; contacts interpret the Dinakaran survey's showing that 20% of those polled supported "others" to be a coded message that

Kalanidhi's brother, Union Minister Dayanidhi Maran, has more popular support than Azhagiri and Kanimozhi.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: Local media highlighted the press freedom angle, with the influential daily The Hindu calling the incident "a murderous attack on press freedom." But family rivalry and internal DMK politics played a huge part. Stalin, a minister in state government, is no doubt the clear favorite. While Azhagiri seemed to be resigned to the idea of Stalin succeeding Karunanidhi, the ascendancy of Union Minister Dayanidhi Maran, assisted by the media influence of his brother, has clearly upset him. The dubious newspaper survey rubbed salt in Azhagiri's wounds as it suggested that he lacks support even in his home district. Dinakaran went even further by implying that Dayanidhi is more popular than Azhagiri. The resulting violence may be a precursor to things to come when the 84-year old Karunanidhi eventually leaves the scene.

16. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: Karunanidhi for his part seems to be deeply embarrassed by the eruption of the family feud at a time when the DMK party is preparing a May 11 celebration of the 50th anniversary of his first election to the state assembly. Initial media reports said that he asked to cancel the celebration in light of the incident, but it appears that the event was too far along to cancel. According to DMK insiders, the party is preparing to transport a million people from all over Tamil Nadu to a massive public meeting in Chennai that will be addressed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress President Sonia Gandhi. END COMMENT.

17. (U) On May 10 post issued a warden message (cleared by Embassy New Delhi and CA/OCS) to advise Americans of the gridlock likely in Chennai during the May 11 public meetings and the possibility of disturbances, which seem more likely than usual given the events in Madurai.

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